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Chapter 1: The Mutant Metamorphic Subject: Femininity and Embodiment in Virginie Despentes's *King Kong théorie*

Amaleena Damlé

The first decade of the new millennium has been witness to the ongoing re-evaluation of the political, social, economic and cultural imperatives of feminism, in France, as across the globe. In academic, practical, popular and everyday contexts, feminism continues to be hotly debated and contested, critically reassessed and reformulated as a means of thinking about the realities of contemporary female experience, and of assuring equality and agency for women into the twenty-first century. Yet, uncomfortably, feminism itself remains an uneasy term, often rejected as an aggressive attack on masculinity, or an unnecessarily bleak and humourless framing of social relations. Where feminism is not entirely cast aside or overlooked, it is in many contexts resisted as an outdated irrelevance in a contemporary society whose daughters seem increasingly and suspiciously detached from the (not so) historical legacy of women's struggles for emancipation. As contemporary feminist thinkers and theorists attempt to articulate and to espouse a renewed sense of engagement with gender politics, they have set their concerns alongside and against previous forms of feminism, redefining their terms as the so-called third-wavers or through various multilayered and slippery perspectives refracted through the blurry lens of postfeminism.

In France, contemporary feminism has been confronted in particular with the task of interrogating and redefining the reified notion of 'French feminism'. To anglophone scholars, 'French feminism' connotes the early 1970s feminist writings of

Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, whose rather artificial bracketing as a trio of thinkers has since been signalled by various theorists (for example, Duchén 1986; Delphy 2001; Moi 1985) as indicating, on the one hand, a problematic exoticization, and, on the other, an overarching emphasis on the intellectual abstraction of psychoanalytical and deconstructive theories that has served to eclipse the realities of diverse feminist movements and activities within the French political landscape of the time. Further, as Lisa Walsh explains, the very definition of French feminism has become a practice in citation that is enmeshed in complicated processes of translation, transferral and othering: ‘From the 1970s forward [...] “French feminism” comes most commonly to refer to a variety of feminism qualified not only by its national origins, but also by something else – a certain supplement that somehow loosely traces the reception of these diverse psychoanalytically informed theories of sexual differences within a more or less foreign Anglo-American context’ (Walsh 2004: 6). It has been commonly acknowledged that in France itself, notions of sexual difference and *écriture féminine* had become unfashionable by the mid-1980s (see, for example, Célestin, DalMolin and Courtivron 2003: 1). And as new feminist voices have come to the fore in France, there has been a notable sense of resistance to the kinds of labelling that has arguably reduced the dynamism of former French feminist thinkers to strictly defined or essentialist positions.¹

¹ Critical overviews of recent feminism in France, for example, such as Célestin, DalMolin and Courtivron (2003) and Walsh (2004), highlight the diversity of the contemporary perspectives, and their titles – respectively, *Beyond French Feminism* and ‘The Swell of the Third Wave’ – point to as yet uncertain futures, instead of attempting definitive categorizations of current trends. This sense of resistance to categorization can also be seen more broadly in the attitudes of female authors to

This chapter aims to analyse this sense of resistance and to explore the opening out of contemporary feminist perspectives in France to the multilayered and metamorphic constitution of femininity, embodiment and the subject of feminism. It takes as its focus one of the key feminist texts published in the first decade of twenty-first-century France: Virginie Despentes's provocative manifesto, *King Kong théorie* [*King Kong Theory*], which appeared with Grasset & Fasquelle in 2006. Despentes is a controversial figure on the French scene, most famous for the violence of her polemical rape-revenge text, *Baise-moi* (1993) [*Fuck me*], and subsequent film of the same name, co-directed with Coralie Trinh-Thi (2000). Born in 1969, she has produced a range of texts, theoretical, literary and filmic, and is commonly associated with the 1990s 'new generation' of women's writing in French. Part-manifesto, part-memoir, *King Kong théorie* focalizes the female body through theoretically informed reflections on rape, prostitution and pornography. Despentes's frank, challenging exposition of these issues opens out pertinent questions about the status and experience of contemporary femininity and urges French society to find new ways of thinking and talking about women's identities, needs and desires. In many ways, and as Michèle Schaal has argued, her work can be helpfully situated within broader trends in Third Wave anglophone feminism, in its focus on intersectionality, hybrid identities, multiplicity and pleasure, as well as a resistance to overly intellectualized dogma (Schaal 2012: 40–1). Though this chapter is reluctant to align Despentes's work resolutely with a particular brand of feminism, it does find her persistent recourse to Anglo-American thinkers, theorists and writers in the formulation of her

labels such as 'women's writing', in contrast to the close connection between feminism and *écriture féminine* of the previous generation (see Jordan 2004; and Damlé 2013, forthcoming).

manifesto of significant interest. For if 'French feminism' has been transplanted and reappropriated (even as 'othered') into the particularity of Anglo-American contexts, certainly Anglo-American feminism has not as yet experienced the same level of transition into French feminist scholarship or writing.²

Just over a decade ago, Gill Allwood (1998: 40) commented that '[w]hat French feminists have not done [...] is to concentrate on the multiple differences among women themselves, and a particularly noticeable difference between French and Anglophone feminism is the level of theorization of multiple identities'. Desportes's *King Kong théorie* positions itself precisely within this theoretical gap in its conceptualization of the multiplicity of female subjectivity. But though the text engages explicitly with the work of a number of pro-sex feminists from the United States, the transmission of other vibrant anglophone voices can also be traced within her writing: in its presentation of a startling vision of female subjectivity expressed as King Kong Girl, Desportes's theories resonate strikingly with the work of recent posthumanist feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti. This chapter suggests that, even if Desportes does not overtly refer to these philosophers, her work similarly uncovers and destabilizes long-held associations of femininity with the monstrous or the beastly. Analysing the multilayered construction of femininity through Desportes's discussions of rape, prostitution and pornography, as well as her reconfiguration of femininity as framed by the figure of King Kong, the chapter argues that Desportes opens out altogether new visions of a transformative, posthuman subjectivity that is revealed to be both embodied and mutant. Before analysing Desportes's text itself though, it briefly turns to reflect upon Haraway and

² A striking example here is that it took ten years before Judith Butler's hugely influential *Gender Trouble* (1990) was translated into French.

Braidotti's respective theories of the posthuman as a means of thinking through the relevance of such a discourse to the conceptualization of contemporary femininity.

The terms posthumanism and the posthuman have emerged over the last couple of decades as critical strategies that aim to destabilize and decentre a deeply entrenched individualism and anthropocentrism in the history of Western civilization. A sustained interrogation of the boundaries of the human subject has led philosophers, critical thinkers and cultural practitioners alike to analyse relations between humans and other forms of life, from plants and animals to life forms that have been generated by developments in bio-science and technology, such as the cybernetic organism. As I have argued elsewhere, 'such a "posthuman" approach to understanding the universe and the place of humans within it is of increasing relevance to contemporary life, in all its aspects, and has resounding implications for questions of community, sustainability and ethics' (Damlé 2012: 303). Feminists have long been suspicious of theoretical paradigms that privilege the kinds of destabilization inaugurated by a host of post-identitarian philosophies, insofar as they may well eclipse the necessity of acquiring clear frames of reference for basic human needs and rights that have yet to be achieved. Nonetheless, the posthuman has gained considerable critical currency in recent years within feminist and queer paradigms as a means of rethinking the body beyond the biological and cultural imperatives of the nature/culture debate.

Haraway's work has been groundbreaking in theorizing discourses of the non-human, ranging from new technological bodies to the primate, destabilizing subject-object, nature-culture divides and working towards an enlarged sense of community based on accountability and recognition. For Haraway, theorizing the posthuman does not aim for the disappearance of the human itself; it intends, rather, a displacement of the transcendent logic of the human and a redistribution of difference and identity.

Haraway has most famously conceptualized the figure of the cyborg, a hybrid creature made up of organism and machine that serves to collapse a humanist sense of origin and unity, and to open out the multiplicity of subjectivity with the knowledge that ‘we are all chimeras’ (Haraway 1991: 150). Her exploration of relations between humans and animals intends a practice for the possibility of a dehierarchized community, and the figure of the primate takes on a particular significance in providing the key to evolution while, at the same time, symbolizing impending disappearance. The primate thus brings into focus ‘the negotiation of the time of origins, the origin of the family, the boundary between self and other, hominid and hominoid, human and animal’ (Haraway 1989: 284). Haraway’s work is distinguished by a post-anthropocentrism that seeks to destabilize patriarchal, oedipal and familial narratives, offering minoritarian subject positions such as femininity a particularly potent subjectivity, ‘synthesized from fusions of outsider identities and in the complex political-historical layerings of “biomythography”’ (Haraway 1989: 174).

For Braidotti, the primary challenge posed to contemporary feminism is to seek out ways of aligning postmodern embodiment and a culture of the hyperreal with ‘a resistance to relativism and a free-fall into cynicism’ (Braidotti 1996). With this in mind, Braidotti argues variously across her work for a nomadic, metamorphic, posthuman female subject, a multilayered and complex interplay of social and symbolic forces. For Braidotti, contemporary fascination with the posthuman mutation of the body in theoretical and cultural contexts can be seen to correspond to a post-nuclear sensibility which raises a host of anxieties about the location of the body in time and space. As she writes:

In such a historical, bio-political and geo-political context, there is no question that what, even and especially in feminism, we go on calling, quite nostalgically, ‘our bodies, ourselves’ are abstract technological constructs fully immersed in advanced psycho-pharmacological industry, bio-science and the new media. This does not make them any less embodied, or less ourselves, it just complicates considerably the task of representing to ourselves the experience of inhabiting them. (Braidotti 2000: 161)

Monstrous, metamorphic, posthuman creatures, Braidotti argues, fulfil a reflective function that displays the contemporary experience of the human subject as one of mutation and offers feminism a means of thinking through the multilayered irreducibility of female subjectivity. As she writes, ‘The monstrous refers to the potentially explosive social subjects for whom contemporary cultural and social theory has no adequate schemes of representation’ (Braidotti 2000: 171). For that reason, Braidotti suggests, feminism might refocus the conventionally pejorative lens on the beastly or non-human body as well as the cultural displacement of the monstrous onto the feminine as a sign of negative embodied difference. It might instead re-envision the mutant, metamorphic subject in terms of the unfolding of the virtual possibilities of fantasmagoric posthuman becoming.

From the very beginning of *King Kong théorie*, Despentes’s focus on forms of feminine negative, embodied difference is apparent: ‘J’écris de chez les moches, pour les moches, les vieilles, les camionneuses, les frigides, les mal baisées, les imbaisables, les hystériques, les tarées, toutes les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf’ (Despentes 2006: 9) [‘I am writing *as* an ugly one *for* the ugly ones: the old

hags, the dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuckables, the neurotics, the psychos, for all those girls that don't get a look-in in the universal market of the consumable chick' (Despentes 2009: 1)]. Despentes's is a self-proclaimed manifesto for the female underdog, then, 'la figure de la looseuse de la féminité (10) ['the loser in the femininity stakes' (2)]. This loser takes on multifarious identities, all of which are relegated to some form of negative difference, in interconnected social, cultural, psychological and embodied terms. Despentes claims to write for the 'invendues' (11) ['left-overs' (3)], the women who in a multitude of ways are positioned as an excessive supplement to the idealized norm of contemporary femininity.

It is worth quoting at length from Despentes's introduction which paints a nuanced portrait of social projections of femininity, as it is precariously balanced between competing cultural and familial imperatives, neatly contained and categorized, immediately identifiable yet undeniably illusory:

l'idéal de la femme blanche, séduisante mais pas pute, bien mariée
mais pas effacée, travaillant mais sans trop réussir, pour ne pas
écraser son homme, mince mais pas névrosée par la nourriture,
restant indéfiniment jeune sans se faire défigurer par les chirurgiens
de l'esthétique, maman épanouie mais pas accaparée par les couches
et les devoirs de l'école, bonne maîtresse de maison mais pas
boniche traditionnelle, cultivée mais moins qu'un homme, cette
femme blanche heureuse qu'on nous brandit tout le temps sous le
nez, celle à laquelle on devrait faire l'effort de ressembler, à part
qu'elle a l'air de beaucoup s'emmerder pour pas grand-chose, de

toute façon je ne l'ai jamais croisée, nulle part. Je crois bien qu'elle n'existe pas. (13)

[this ideal of the attractive but not whorish white woman, in a good marriage but not self-effacing, with a nice job but not so successful she outshines her man, slim but not neurotic over food, forever young without being disfigured by the surgeon's knife, a radiant mother not overwhelmed by nappies and homework, who manages her home beautifully without becoming a slave to housework, who knows a thing or two but less than a man, this happy white woman who is constantly shoved under our noses, this woman we are all supposed to work hard to resemble – I for one have never met her, not anywhere. My hunch is that she doesn't exist. (5)]

Despentes's analysis highlights the social construction of femininity, pitting Beauvoirian concepts against a twenty-first-century backdrop of renewed anxieties about perfect femininity, the reshaping of the body in a hypervisual culture where eating disorders and technology intervene in the politics of beauty, the renegotiation of the balance between private and public spaces, the conflict between domesticity and intellectual or economic achievement and agency in a society which bears witness to new patterns and reconfigurations of conventional family units, yet nonetheless continues to posit motherhood above all as 'l'expérience féminine incontournable, valorisée entre toutes (23) ['the essential female experience, valued above all others' (15)]. Despentes's manifesto professes to writing for those who slip in between the margins of representation, writing not the phantasmatic image of idealized contained

femininity, but as a woman ‘toujours trop tout ce qu’elle est, trop agressive, trop bruyante, trop grosse, trop brutale, trop hirsute, toujours trop virile me dit-on’ (11) [‘always too much of everything – too aggressive, too noisy, too fat, too rough, too hairy, always too masculine, I am told’ (3)]. Yet if Desportes appears to recuperate her own identity to a masculine position, stating that everything she likes about her life is owed to her ‘virilité’ (11) [‘masculinity’ (3)], this serves to reiterate the artificial construction of both genders, and her intention is to write not only for the excessive remainders of femininity, but for a spectrum of subjects who do not, cannot or will not conform to dualistic gender politics: ‘aussi bien et dans la foulée [j’écris] pour les hommes’ (13) [‘in the same vein, while I’m at it, I’m writing for men’ (4)].

In her exploration of three concerns that have been central to feminist debate – rape, prostitution and pornography – Desportes examines the putative oppositioning of women as victims and as culpable agents of sex and sexuality. In so doing, however, she offers interpretations of female subjectivity and desire that interrogate and deconstruct gender stereotypes all the while exposing the complex constitution of femininity at the nexus of social and symbolic forces. As Virginie Sauzon (forthcoming) observes, ‘Desportes appears to be committed as much to ridding women of their status as victim as of the guilt that society inflicts upon them when they follow barely accepted or otherwise restricted paths’ (my translation). Desportes’s description of her experience of rape exposes a logic that requires women either to inhabit their own inescapable victimhood or to be in some way tacitly engaged in consensual sex. That her candid admission, ‘[j]’ai fait du stop, j’ai été violée, j’ai refait du stop’ (19) [‘I hitchhiked, I was raped, I hitchhiked again’ (11)], provokes such incredulous responses only serves to reveal deeply embedded, internalized assumptions about female sexuality as insidiously but absolutely

responsible for the violence it may be submitted to. As Desportes writes, '[d]ans le viol, il faut toujours prouver qu'on n'était vraiment pas d'accord. La culpabilité est comme soumise à une attraction morale non énoncée, qui voudrait qu'elle penche toujours du côté de celle qui s'est fait mettre, plutôt que de celui qui a cogné' (44–5) ['[w]ith rape, it's always up to you to prove that you really didn't give your consent. It's as if guilt obeys an unspoken moral pull towards the one who got hit, rather than the one who did the whacking (36)]. These assumptions are corroborated within the brutal context of Desportes's own rape experience since, although she remembers that she is carrying a flick-knife on her, her first thoughts are those of terror that her attackers may find it and use it against her, rather than conceiving that she could inflict violence upon them. Inevitably, when the rapists discover the blade, their reaction to the fact that it has not been used against them refuses to acknowledge anything of the socio-cultural conditioning that has shaped female emasculation, and is instead reductively, violently expressed as an affirmation of pleasure: 'Alors, c'est que ça lui plaisait' (48) ['She liked it, then' (39)].

Desportes is relentless in unpicking the complexities of female responses to the violence of male desire, and the subsequent frankness of her discussion of rape fantasy may be discomfiting but it vitally exposes the extent to which the logic of female masochism as well as the structures of guilt and responsibility are imposed upon the female psyche. Desportes attributes rape fantasy to the female martyrdom of her religious education, in biblical discourse and iconography, and to the cultural mechanisms of Judeo-Christian society that structures female sexual pleasure around its own powerlessness. As she argues:

Il y a une prédisposition féminine au masochisme, elle ne vient pas de nos hormones, ni du temps des cavernes, mais d'un système culturel précis, et elle n'est pas sans implications dérangeantes dans l'exercice que nous pouvons faire de nos indépendances.

Voluptueuse et excitante, elle est aussi handicapante: être attirée par ce qui détruit nous écarte toujours du pouvoir. (52)

[There is a female predisposition for masochism, which stems not from our hormones, nor from prehistoric times, but from a specific cultural system, and this predisposition has disturbing implications for the way we exercise our independence. It may be voluptuous and arousing, but it also handicaps us: being attracted to that which destroys us to keep us away from power. (43)]

If Despentes's discussion raises the uncomfortable questions that surround the experience of someone who has been raped and who has also fantasized about being raped, it addresses the impossibility of an answer. As she writes, on this subject there is complete silence, because what is deemed to be unsayable is also utterly undermining insofar as it reveals the extent to which female sexuality and desire are inextricably bound up with a patriarchal logic. As Victoria Best and Martin Crowley (2007: 39) argue, gendered psychical space is necessarily heterotopic: 'there can be no theory of the female (sexual) subject that is not deeply entrenched in the tracking and creating of fantasies, that would seem to be predominantly masculine'.

In her reflections on prostitution and pornography, Despentes displays an equally provocative stance, one that probes at the multilayered, heterotopic spaces of

female sexuality. Prostitution, she asserts, was a crucial step in reconstructing her sense of self after rape, '[u]ne entreprise de dédommagement, billet après billet, de ce qui m'avait été pris par la brutalité' (72) ['[a] business of dollar-by-dollar compensation, for what had been taken from me by brute force' (61)]. She claims to have been struck by the vulnerability, humanity, fragility and distress, rather than the aggressiveness or brutality of her clients (65; 55). Meanwhile, her experience of prostitution is such that it allows her to experiment with her own sexual desires (70; 59). And though being a prostitute places her in a position of hyperfemininity, much as rape had, there is a crucial sense of reappropriation: 'Ce sexe n'appartenait qu'à moi ne perdait pas en valeur au fur et à mesure qu'il servait, et il pouvait être rentable' (72) ['My sex belonged to me only, it didn't lose value through being used, and it could be profitable' (61)]. Despentès insists that she is not suggesting that, under any conditions, and for any woman, prostitution is always innocuous; she is interested, however, in the ways in which women might use their own stigmatization in order to turn a profit (83; 72). If the female sexual subject cannot be separated out from masculine structures of desire, Despentès argues for the explosion of gender politics from within the world of sex work. As she affirms in a documentary on sex workers and pro-sex theorists, *Mutantes: féminisme porno punk* (2009) [*Mutants: Porno Punk Feminism*], 'the body, pleasure, pornographic representation and sex work are political tools that we should take hold of' (my translation).³

³ The documentary was published on youtube on 2 April 2012 in two parts:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqhPwJAnSqU>> and

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adRnRVCLAsY>> accessed 10 January 2013.

In *King Kong théorie*, Despentès's discussions of both prostitution and pornography highlight the construction of a hyperfeminine sexual subject, one that might be deployed as a political tool of empowerment:

Finalement aucun besoin d'être une mégabombasse, ni de connaître des secrets techniques insensés pour devenir une femme fatale... il suffisait de jouer le jeu. De la féminité. Et personne ne pouvait débarquer 'attention c'est une imposture', puisque je n'en étais pas une, pas plus qu'une autre. (64)

[There was actually no need to be the greatest lay in history or know all kinds of wild secrets to become a femme fatale; you just had to play the game. The femininity game. And no one could come out with 'Watch out, she's a fake', because I wasn't – no more so than anyone else. (53)]

Playing a hyperfeminized role is a gesture that participates in a politics of parody that exposes the very formulation of femininity as a set of assumed signifying poses. Pornography in particular, Despentès argues, as a performed spectacle of sexuality, can be mobilized so as to emphasize the artificial construction of the female sexual subject and to reverse conventional gender politics that would place female sex workers in position of objectification. '[A]u fait, qui est la victime?' (99), Despentès asks, '[who is in fact the victim? (87)]: 'Les femmes, qui perdent toute dignité du moment qu'on les voit sucer une bite? Ou les hommes, trop faibles et inaptes à maîtriser leur envie de voir du sexe, et de comprendre qu'il s'agit uniquement d'une

représentation' (99–100) ['The actresses, who surrender their dignity the moment we see them giving a blow job? Or the male viewers, weak and unable to overcome their wish to watch sex, or to understand that what they are watching is merely a performance?' (87)]. That pornography is too often expected to reflect the real rather than being acknowledged as an illusory spectacle, Desportes claims, ignores the complex movements of the libido, which does not always fit into a socialized sense of gendered identity (93; 81). In highlighting the mobilization of the hyperfeminine in her discussions of sex work, then, Desportes points to the politically empowering potential of performance and spectacle, where parody serves to deconstruct and decentre gendered politics while, at the very same time, indicating the complex multilayering of desire as it spills beyond the bounds of socialized sexuality. As Braidotti (1996) argues, the parody of femininity can serve to reveal that femininity itself is 'a set of available poses, a set of costumes rich in history and social power relations, but not fixed or compulsory any longer'. Desportes's manifesto asks that gender politics be turned inside out through the contestatory tools that parody enables, allowing femininity to be asserted just as it is deconstructed, its excess and irreducibility uncontained by the social exigencies of gender roles.

If *King Kong théorie* begins with an assertion of feminine negative, embodied difference and with the claim that '[j]e suis plutôt King Kong que Kate Moss, comme fille' (11) ['As a girl, I am more King Kong than Kate Moss' (3)], Desportes carefully composes an analysis of contemporary femininity as multilayered and as hybridized through her explorations of rape, prostitution and pornography. Towards the end of the text, this mutant, posthuman embodiment is explicitly analysed through the very figure of King Kong, and through its representation in Peter Jackson's 2005 remake

of the film classic.⁴ Desportes frames the narrative of King Kong, feared monster who is captured, exhibited and killed, and his relationship with the beautiful blonde, Ann Darrow, who is used as bait to seize him, within an interrogation of gendered embodiment and mutation. As a cultural icon, King Kong is always more than merely the beastly other. According to Haraway, the figure of the primate brings into focus the formulation of identity categories through the complex layerings of biomythography. And, as Cynthia Erb observes, King Kong as a primate-monster is a hybridized creature of both terror and possibility, articulated at the intersection of competing binary categories of identity. In her words, ‘King Kong’s monstrous hybridity manages to absorb most of the binary structures characteristic of Western thought – East/West, black/white, female/male, primitive/modern’ (Erb 1998: 17).

In her association of femininity with King Kong, Desportes calls upon the figure of the primate-monster as a mutant, metamorphic form of embodiment, whose excess spills out beyond the containment of normative gender and sexuality:

Ce King Kong n’a ni bite, ni couilles, ni seins. Aucune scène ne permet de lui attribuer un genre. Il n’est ni mâle ni femelle. Il est juste poilu et noir. Herbivore et contemplative, cette créature a le sens de l’humour, et de la démonstration de puissance. Entre Kong et la blonde, il n’y a aucune scène de séduction érotique. La belle et la bête s’apprivoisent et se protègent, sont sensuellement tendres l’un avec l’autre. Mais de façon non sexuée. (112)

⁴ See also Lucile Desblache’s chapter in this volume, which analyses this aspect of Desportes’s text.

[King Kong has neither cock, nor balls, nor boobs. The viewer is never able to ascribe a gender to him. He is neither male nor female. He is merely hairy and black. This thoughtful, herbivorous creature has a sense of humour and a taste for displaying strength. There is no erotic seduction scene between Kong and the blonde. Beauty and the beast tame and protect each other, and are sensual and loving with each other. But in an asexual manner. (100)]

Despentes highlights the impossibility of the defining Kong's sex as a means of displacing the binary structures of gender politics, and opening out the affective, fluid nature of the relationship between the two. If gender and sexuality cannot be definitely ascribed, however, that is not to say that they are absolutely erased; that the sensual is privileged over the sexual seems rather to emphasize an affective plasticity. The ambiguity of King Kong's sexual identity also corresponds to the backdrop of his environment, an island populated with metamorphic, posthuman creatures, all of which resist recuperation to quantifiable sex or gender:

chenilles monstrueuses, aux tentacules visqueux et pénétrants, mais moites et roses comme des chattes de femmes, larves à têtes de bites, qui s'ouvrent et deviennent des vagins dentés qui croquent les têtes des gars de l'équipage... D'autres font appel à une iconographie plus genrée, mais relevant du domaine de la sexualité polymorphe: araignées velues et brontosaures gris et identiques comparables à une horde de spermatozoïdes lourdingues... (112)

[monstrous caterpillars with slimy penetrating tentacles, but moist and pink, like cunts; grubs that look like cocks that then open and become toothed vaginas to behead the crew... others come closer to the iconography of gender, but within the domain of polymorphous sexuality: hairy spiders, and masses of identical grey brontosauruses, resembling a horde of clumsy spermatozoids... (100)]

These ambiguous, metamorphic creatures juxtapose and deconstruct the morphology of sex as well as the iconography of gender, signalling a plastic, mutant sexual subjectivity that exceeds the taxonomic binary separation of genders politically imposed at the end of the nineteenth century (112; 100). For Despenes, then, King Kong becomes a metaphor for hybrid embodiment, while the island provides the potential for ‘une forme de sexualité polymorphe et hyperpuissante’ (112) [‘ultra-powerful, polymorphous sexuality’ (100–1)]. Her analysis of femininity as a multilayered construct thus finds its embodiment in this posthuman vision of mutant, metamorphic subjectivity, resonating with Braidotti’s claim that the contemporary subject of feminism is not

Woman as the complementary and specular other of man but rather a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity. ‘She’ no longer coincides with the disempowered reflection of a dominant subject who casts his masculinity in a universalistic posture. She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process, a mutant, the other of

the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis. (Braidotti 2002: 11–12)

By way of conclusion, it is worth reflecting briefly on Despentès's textual strategies in this evocation of posthuman, mutant subjectivity. Over the course of Despentès's discussion of the film, it is noteworthy that her use of personal pronoun to signify King Kong slips from 'il' [him] to 'elle' [her].⁵ By means of this hesitation, she re-reads the ending of the narrative through a hybridized image of King Kong as s/he resists enclosure within gendered representation. As King Kong searches for the heroine, Despentès once again stresses that this is not an erotic relationship governed by the usual sexual politics of domination and passivity, but a sensual, playful one that opens out the malleability of the subject: 'King Kong, ou le chaos d'avant les genres' (114) ['King Kong, or chaos before the gender split' (102)]. As a result, when the men in uniform and planes intervene to kill King Kong and as it is famously proclaimed that Beauty has killed the Beast, Despentès exposes this for the cinematic lie that it is, indicating the unusual, ambiguous but ultimately intimate relationship that is experienced between Ann Darrow and King Kong (114; 102–3). But despite the strength of this sense of intimacy, King Kong is, in the end, eliminated in the film, and its story mythologized through terms that repeat all the binary codes that may have otherwise been challenged or displaced in the very statement of opposition 'c'est la belle qui a tué la bête' (114) ['It was Beauty who killed the beast' (102)].

This violent erasure of King Kong within the film notwithstanding, there is some semblance of excess and remainder, for as Despentès writes, 'violence et sexe

⁵ In the published English translation, the pronoun 'it' is used.

ne sont pas domesticables par la représentation' (113) ['violence and sex cannot be tamed through representation' (102)]. And it is this sense of absolute irreducibility which exemplifies not only Desportes's figuration of the mutant, metamorphic subject, and of polymorphous, plastic sexuality, but that also encapsulates her text as a powerfully provocative feminist manifesto that refuses to be contained. Desportes's use of violent, angry and emotive language is characteristic of her writing style more generally, and here it allows the excess and violence of the sexual subject to spill out onto the page. Further, the very composition of the text as a manifesto exceeds representation, mirroring the hybrid subject in its own textual hybridity. Far from presenting anything that might resemble a master-discourse in her putative feminist manifesto, then, Desportes interweaves narratives pertaining to the personal and the political, the theoretical and the practical, the highbrow and the popular; she draws on her real-life experiences of rape and prostitution, social and political realities, a range of feminist theories in both the French and Anglo-American traditions, as well as employing concrete examples from politics and popular visual culture. In so doing, Desportes presents a forceful, accessible, but highly informed analysis of the contemporary female subject, reinvigorating – without necessarily redefining – French feminism in the contemporary realm in a multilayered performative manner. Exploring the mutant, metamorphic female subject through the figure of King Kong, the value of *King Kong théorie* as a theoretical text thus also lies in its polemical textual exposure of the very irreducibility of the contemporary subject of feminism.